Introduction

Welcome to the Oxfam America Hunger Banquet. We are here today because more than 2.5 billion people live in poverty.

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Over 925 million people suffer from chronic hunger.

[PAUSE]

A child dies from hunger or a preventable disease every four seconds. That’s 22,000 children a day.

[PAUSE]

You may think hunger is about too many people and too little food. That is not the case. Our rich and bountiful planet produces enough food to feed every woman, man, and child on earth.

Hunger is about power. Its roots lie in inequalities in access to resources. The results are illiteracy, poverty, war, and the inability of families to grow or buy food.

Hunger affects everyone, in countries rich and poor. But some of us face greater challenges than others.

About 80 percent of the world’s hungry people live in rural areas, where most work as farmers, fishers, herders, and laborers. Every day, looming constraints on resources—like fertile land and water—make it more difficult for food producers, especially women, to feed their families. Global shifts in weather are adding to the problem, making it harder for farmers to sow and harvest their crops.

This event is a metaphor for how food and other resources are inequitably distributed in the world. As such, an Oxfam America Hunger Banquet event can only touch upon the issues. We cannot recreate the many complex ways poverty manifests itself. We will not have time to go into all the problems associated with lack of access to health care, education, and employment opportunities, and the realities of the day-to-day struggle for survival.

The one thing I would like you to remember is this: Everyone on earth has the same basic needs; it is only our circumstances—where we live and the culture into which we are born—that differ. Some of us are born into relative prosperity and security, while millions—through no choice of our own— are born into poverty.

As each of us walked in the door here today, we drew our lot at random. Look around, and you can see that equality and balance don’t exist here.

Please note: No one section of this room represents a single country. While the US is one of the wealthiest countries on earth, almost 44 million Americans live in poverty. Nearly 20 percent of children in the US—or about one in every five American children live below the poverty line. Stark inequalities prevail everywhere.

Now I would like to introduce you to the three segments of this world. But remember it’s too easy to measure this world purely in economic terms. It is really about each person’s ability to achieve a sense of security and to access resources.

HIGH INCOME TABLES

If you are sitting over here, you represent the 15 percent of the world’s population with a per capita income of $12,000 or more per year. You are fortunate enough to be able to afford a nutritious daily diet. Since many of you exceed your daily requirement of calories, you are likely to face health problems such as heart disease and diabetes.

But most of you have access to the best medical care in the world. It’s a given that your children will attend school; the only uncertainty is how many years they will study after high school. Access to credit? You turn down more offers than you can count. You and your family live in a comfortable and secure home. You probably own at least one car and two televisions. When you take your annual vacation, you don’t worry about your job disappearing in your absence. You have access to virtually everything you need and the security to enjoy it.

MIDDLE INCOME TABLES

If you are sitting here, you represent roughly 35 percent of the world’s population. You earn between $987 and $11,999 a year. The levels of access and security you enjoy vary greatly. You live on the edge. For many, it would take losing only one harvest to drought or a serious illness to throw you into poverty.

You probably own no land and may work as a day laborer, a job that pays a paltry amount but it’s better than nothing. Your small income allows for some use of electricity and a few years of schooling for your children especially if they are boys. Alternatively, you may have left your family to go work in the city. You hope that the money you earn from your less-than-minimum-wage job as domestic help or sweatshop worker will eventually allow you to move back home and make a better life for your family.

Let me put a name to a person in this middle-income group: Pablo Fajardo (PAHB-low Fah-HAR-doh), from El Carmen, Ecuador. Pablo’s parents could only afford to send him to school through eighth grade, so as a teenager he took a job at an oil company. There, Pablo witnessed the unfair treatment of many workers, as well as grave destruction of the environment. It was hard for him not to speak up about what he saw, but he knew that if he made trouble, he might lose his job, and his family was relying on him.

If you are sitting on the floor, you represent the majority of the world’s population roughly 50 percent. Your average income is less than $986 a year about $2.70 a day although many of you earn much less.

Every day is a struggle to meet your family’s basic needs. Finding food, water, and shelter can consume your entire day. For many of you women, it would not be uncommon to have to walk five to 10 miles every day to get water, spend several more hours working in the fields, and of course, take care of the children.

Many of you are frequently hungry. It is quite likely that you don’t get the minimum number of calories your hardworking life requires. Many of you are homeless or living in structures so flimsy that a hard rain or strong wind could cause a major catastrophe.

Even though education is the single most powerful weapon against poverty, school is a luxury few of your children will ever experience. Most girls don’t even bother to dream about school.

Adequate health care is out of the question. For most of you, early death is all too familiar, with many mothers expecting to lose one or two children before they turn 5.

If you are lucky enough to work, you are probably a tenant farmer who must give your landowner 75 percent of your harvest. Or you may get occasional work as a day laborer at a large plantation growing bananas, sugar, or coffee for export. You reap few benefits from these crops; you’d prefer to grow food your children could eat.

Let me introduce a real person from this group: Sarina (SAH- ree-nah), a young mother of two from Padma, Bangladesh. Sarina and her husband, a fisherman, built their small wooden house on a narrow strip of shore between a local river and the Bay of Bengal. They knew that this was a risky place to make their home, but it was the only land the struggling family could afford.

Then a major cyclone struck. Sarina managed to save one of their three cows, but she and her husband lost nearly every- thing else during the storm, including their house and the fishing boat that they relied on to earn a living.

[GESTURES TO THE WHOLE ROOM]

Take a moment to look around you now. Eighty-five percent of you are not seated at the table. Eighty-five percent of you do not share in the bounty of our planet.



